

MY LITTLE CORNER OF THE WORLD

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A story based on true events

By

Nerissa A. Broas

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This book is dedicated
To Mama and Papa,
The most giving people I've ever known.

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“First, foremost and always, to God be all the Glory.”
-Mama and Papa

BEGINNING:

Leaving San Francisco

Chapter One

I woke up from a very odd dream. For the entire night, I dreamt of an elegantly dressed, fragile looking, elderly lady. She was wearing a Filipino dress with butterfly sleeves, seated on a chair as if she were waiting to have her picture taken. Who was she?

I was already awake when I heard Mama say “*Wake up!!*”

She sounded so excited. “*We ride on a ship to the Philippines today! Rise and shine!*”

I didn’t feel like getting up. I started to think about all my friends who were probably getting ready for school. When would I ever see them again?

I heard my big brother jump out of bed and yell. “*Get up, slow poke! What are you waiting for, Christmas?*”

I hated the day already.

I was afraid of going to the Philippines. Just last night some relatives were telling me that mosquitoes were the size of soda bottles and cockroaches were the size of plates. They said it was sticky, muggy and blazing hot. I really didn’t want to go, but I had to. Papa wanted to retire there and that was that.

The thought of twenty one days at sea was too scary. What if the ship sinks? What if I get seasick? Why do we have to leave San Francisco anyway?

Then I remembered the lady in my dream. Will I meet her there? Who was she?

From where I was lying, I saw a tiny cockroach crawling on the wall. I decided to get up to talk to it.

“*Hello there, little cockroach!*” I whispered. “*How are you? I heard you have relatives in the Philippines who are the size of plates! Can you believe that? Plates! Well anyway, can you tell them I was nice to you when we met in San Francisco? I don’t know, maybe you can transmit that through your antennae? Is that something you can do?*” I stopped abruptly when I heard Mama and my big brother’s muffled laughter. As Mama giggled and gave me a hug, I looked back at the tiny cockroach and I hoped it was communicating with its Filipino relatives.

During breakfast, the mean kids next door knocked on our apartment door. They came to apologize for how mean they’ve been to my brother and me. Their mom probably made them do it. If there was one thing I was grateful for, it was the fact that we were not going to live next door to them anymore. These kids defined the word cruel through their actions toward us, especially when our parents were not around. I learned

early on how never to treat anyone the way they treated me. I remember whispering, “*I hope you change when you grow up*”, although I can’t remember if they heard me.

One of the mean brothers loved to “*accidentally*” trip and tug on my hair in front of my friends at school. “*Ooops...sorry!*” he’d always say with a dumb grin on his face. Their teen sister used to sneer at me for having older parents. My father was a widower in his early sixties and my mother was in her early forties. *What was so bad about that?*

The meanest of the brothers liked putting my big brother in a headlock. The thing was that my brother was terribly asthmatic. Making him tired always triggered serious attacks. Our mean neighbor thought that was funny. So he enjoyed making my brother tired.

Although I was glad to leave our mean neighbors, my heart was heavy for leaving my big sisters. I was also sad to leave my classmates, my teacher, my neighborhood, my cousins. Some of my nephews and nieces were close to my age, and they were my best playmates ever. I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving. *What would it be like in the Philippines? I hope I end up liking it there.*

I will miss Chinatown terribly! The other night, one of my older sisters, *Ate (Uh-the) Martha* and her family took my brother and me to Chinatown. It was our going away dinner with all their kids. We piled up in their station wagon and headed to Grant Avenue. We had so much fun!

The restaurant looked very fancy. I was fascinated with the beautiful Asian room dividers that were located at the entrance. They were silk screen panels with a beautifully painted scene that showed a blossom tree where a bird and her chicks were perched. The room was filled with laughter, conversation, and the sweet aroma of steamed rice and Chinese food. We were led to a big round table with a lazy susan turntable at the center of it. After we were seated, all the kids peeked under the table to see whose feet were dangling and whose could touch the ground.

While waiting to be served, we talked about the important things in life.

“*The Beatles are supposed to be coming to the States and you’re going to miss all that!*” said Flor.

“*Maybe they’ll come to the Philippines!*” I suggested.

“*Uh... why would they want to go there?*” asked Nita.

“*I don’t know... who knows, right?*” I said timidly.

Everyone burst out laughing!

As we sadly imagined what life would be like away from each other, our waiter arrived. My brother-in-law *Kuya (Coo-yuh) Ven* began pointing to food items listed on the menu. I watched the waiter jot down each order on a small pad of paper and wondered how he could write so fast! He came back to deliver two big tea pots with a stack of tiny tea cups for everyone seated at the table.

One by one the parade of food dishes began to arrive starting with Chinese creamed corn soup, followed by some tasty chow mein noodles, barbecue pork, deep fried egg rolls, fried rice and egg foo yung. We ended with sliced fruit and fortune cookies for dessert.

“You will be on a ship for twenty one days!” said Elly pretending that it was what she was reading from the little paper fortune that came from my cookie. Once again, everyone burst out laughing!

After dinner, we were led through different shops along Grant Avenue. I picked out trinkets, fake jewelry and miniature pink paper umbrellas. I also found a soft plastic mask beautifully decorated with purple, green and yellow feathers. *Do they have things like these in the Philippines?*

My thoughts were interrupted when Nita said, *“Remember to write to us!”*

“I will! I promised to write to my classmates and Mrs. Weiking too!”

“Do you know when you’re coming back?” asked Sonny.

“No,” I said, *“maybe in two years?”*

“Wow... that’s gonna be a long time!”

That’s *exactly* what I was thinking.

When we got home, Mama opened up one of the suitcases and safely tucked away my Chinatown treasures inside of it.

As I sat on the bed watching her, I asked, *“Mama, how long are we going to stay there?”*

“We’ll probably be back in two years,” she assured me. *“I’m sure Papa will want to come back after two years.”*

She said *probably*.

Now that the day to leave had finally arrived, the phone wouldn’t stop ringing. It seemed everyone under the sun wanted to say goodbye or express how jealous they were that we were going to the Philippines. *Jealous? Really?*

It was about 1:00 P.M. when I saw the youngest sister of our mean neighbors with their parents, standing in the living room. Our parents were saying their farewells and talking about the trip. She was not interested in any of it.

She was a cute little kindergartener who had Downs Syndrome. Though she was sibling to the mean kids next door, she did not have a mean bone in her body. All she ever knew how to be was *nice* and I loved her for that. She was my very good friend.

I saw her peek through spaces between the adults standing in front of her. She let go of her mother's hand and squeezed her way through to walk over to me.

I gave her a big hug and she looked up at me with a sad smile.

"Goodbye," she said softly.

"Goodbye," I said as I held back my tears and smiled back.

I knew I would definitely miss her. I was one of her "*big sisters*" when she briefly attended kindergarten at our public school. She was transferred out two weeks before my last day at school.

I asked her if she liked her new school, but she was not able to answer because we were interrupted when my sisters and brothers-in-law arrived. The baggage loading had begun.

As the suitcases were carried away, the apartment slowly began to look stark and empty.

I looked up and around and did not feel the warmth of home anymore.

I quickly ran to look out of the 2nd floor apartment window one last time.

It was *my* window.

This was where I always stood to watch the pouring rain, kids on skates, or the cars that were passing by.

This was where I looked out to watch the protests on Friday nights.

This was where I watched the Beatniks smoke cigarettes and beat on their drums.

This was where I waited for my friends coming over to play with me.

This was where I always watched Papa walk back from the corner store.

This was the last time I'd ever look out of this window and I was sad.

One of my sisters looked up at me from the street and waved for me to come down.

I nodded and mouthed “*Okay!*”

Mama and Papa came back up to do one final sweep.

My big brother walked over to me and motioned his head toward the door saying, “*Come on, slow poke.*”

All I could think of at that moment was, “*Twenty-one days with my brother on a ship. There'd better be other kids on that thing!*”

As we all walked out together and closed the door behind us, my young heart immediately knew that it was the end of my American life as I knew it.

Chapter Two

I always sat next to a rolled down window, because of my motion sickness.

No one liked when I got sick in the car. Our family always bundled up, whenever we drove anywhere, because car rides with me were guaranteed to be windy.

My older sister Olivia asked Papa, “*How will she survive being on a ship for that long? She'll be sick the entire way.*” Her instincts were telling her that Papa had no plans of coming back, and she didn’t want us to leave. So to convince my parents to stay, she called the house daily, to remind them of my horrible motion sickness.

It didn’t work.

The drive to the Pier seemed to take forever.

The Four Seasons were singing “Sherry” on the radio as my family chattered and laughed inside the station wagon. I was not listening to what they were saying or why they were laughing. I was too busy watching people on the street as they went about their business.

For instance, a man wearing a dark suit and hat walked briskly with a newspaper tucked under his arm.

Mothers kept toddlers in hand while others pushed baby carriages.

People carried brown paper shopping bags, while others held department store bags.

A fancy lady wore a long red coat, black gloves and a pretty black hat with a net veil that stylishly hung in front of her eyes.

I watched cars ahead of us and cars alongside of us, and took long glimpses of each building and house that we passed. *Will everything look the same after two years?*

At the Pier, I caught sight of Papa’s smiling face as he looked out at sea.

He looked *really* happy.

I decided to stop thinking about giant insects.

I began to get excited about the trip.

I also couldn’t wait to meet my grandmothers.

I pretended to be one of Papa's sailor friends who would be excited to board a naval ship with him. I imagined myself in a sailor uniform with a duffle bag on my back and a look on my face similar to Papa's.

I looked around, and saw children running, laughing and playing. I hoped they were there to board the ship and not just there to see people off.

Each of my sisters was spending as much time as they could with me before we left. I leaned my head on my sister Martha's arm and whispered, "*I'll miss you guys a lot.*"

My sister Erminia, who was seated next to her husband Romy, sat me on her lap and said, "*You're going to get bit by mosquitoes and it's going to feel very itchy. Remember not to scratch because if you do, you'll end up with a horrible skin condition called Galis (guh-lis).*"

I knew she was telling me the truth. After all she's a nurse. But I wasn't interested about skin care. I wanted to hear more about the mosquitoes.

"Ate (Uh-teh) Minyang, are mosquitoes really as big as soda bottles?"

"No, they're not. Who told you that? They're tiny and their bites are very itchy."

"So don't scratch, okay?"

"I promise! So mosquitoes are really tiny?"

*"Yes, they're tiny and they bite! Are you listening to me? Do **not** scratch, okay?"*

"I won't scratch. I promise."

Our eldest sister Ate Wawa was standing in front of me, rummaging through her purse. She pulled out a pretty rosary made of delicate chains that linked sparkly Opal beads. The lead strand held a beautiful cross at the end.

Holding it out to me she asked, "*Do you know how to use this?*"

I shook my head *no* and answered, "*Uh-uh.*"

"Uh-uh? That's fine. You'll quickly learn how to use it. Here's a prayer book to go with it. I hear you're going to St. Joseph when you get there. Write to me and tell me all about it."

"Okay! Thank you, Ate Wawa!"

“You’re welcome.” Pointing to the rosary and prayer book, she instructed me to “Use it,” and “Read it.”

“I will, and I promise to write about the saint school.”

Shaking her head, she chuckled and said, “*St. Joseph is a Catholic school, not a saint school!*”

I shrugged. “*What do I know?*”

My sister Olivia looked at my feet and asked, “*Why aren’t you wearing the shoes I bought you?*”

“Mama and Papa packed them away!”

We both laughed quietly as her jaw dropped and her hands went up in the air.

She was talking about the shoes that I had admired for days. They were a pair of simple black leather slip-ons with pointy toes. Artfully sewn on the top portion of each shoe, were two rectangular pieces of jagged edged brown and tan leather patches. The patches formed a small slit in the form of an inverted V right where the foot slips in. They were the most beautiful shoes I had ever seen in my life.

Mama and I went in to buy a pair, but the store didn’t have my size. “*We’re getting a new shipment of these in two weeks,*” said the shoe salesman.

“Ah, but we’ll be long gone by then,” Mama sadly replied.

Since then, I made sure to stop and admire those shoes, whenever we walked by that shoe store.

When my sister Olivia took me shopping for clothes to take to the Philippines, we walked by the store. I asked her if I could stop for a few seconds to look at the shoe display.

“Is there a particular one that you like?”

Pointing to the shoes that I wanted, I told her, “*That one, but they don’t have my size.*”

“How do you know?”

“Mama and I already went in there. They’re getting a shipment but we’ll be gone by the time it gets here.”

She pushed the door open, raised one brow and said, “*What if the shipment came early?*”

“*Oh yeah... what if it did,*” I said as I followed her in.

The salesman told us that the shipment had not arrived. He saw me and remembered that I had been there before. So the nice salesman offered to check the back room one more time. He measured my right foot before heading to the back. My heart began to race when he came out with a shoe box. *He found my size!*

He said, “*This is a half size smaller but let's see how your feet feel in them.*”

The shoes felt a little snug, but they weren't too tight. I walked around in them for a little while before blurting, “*They're perfect!*”

My sister and the salesman looked at me suspiciously and asked, “*Are you sure?*”

I fibbed and said, “*Yes! They feel fine!*”

I knew it would bother me after awhile. But this was my last and only chance of owning them.

She bought the shoes, along with some shoe stretchers. Those were the first items that went inside my suitcase.

I wish I had them on today, for Ate Olive to see.

My sister Evangeline usually joked around with me and laughed a lot. Today was different. She quietly stood next to me and softly rubbed my back as she sniffed and occasionally wiped away tears. She and her husband Pete always picked me up to play with their daughters Gail and Maxine.

I looked up at her and said, “*I'll miss you a lot, Ate Vangine*”.

She just nodded and continued to rub my back.

When the ship's horn blew loudly, everyone huddled around Mama, Papa, my brother and me.

Voices got louder and people spoke faster.

All around the pier, passengers began to gather belongings, hug, kiss, and say farewells.

I felt butterflies in my stomach and fears slowly crept back in, as we gathered our belongings, hugged, kissed, and said our own farewells.

I looked up at the enormous ship we were about to board and thought, *why couldn't we just ride on a plane?*

Chapter Three

Sailors guided and assisted passengers aboard the *USNS Barrett*. It was a very scary walk up to the ship. I was so afraid I'd slip and fall into the water, so I held on tightly to Mama's hand and did not let go until we were safely on board.

“Cabin class passengers can safely wave goodbye from the deck,” said a few friendly sailors, to a couple of flirty girls.

So that’s what we’re called... cabin class passengers. I felt like part of a herd as we all rushed up onto deck.

Papa quickly found an open spot where we could stand and wave to everyone down below. I watched his eyes search for my sisters among the crowd. As soon as he spotted them, he took off his hat and used it to wave to them wildly.

Everyone’s hands immediately went up to wave back.

I finally stopped waving and began to sob into my hands. I could no longer recognize any of them through my tears.

As the ship took us farther away, I stood quietly and watched the pier get smaller by the minute. The wind began to pick up after awhile and the air turned chilly. The crowd on deck got thinner as folks began to move down, to an inside lounge area.

The area had a long row of round windows where we watched the awesome sunset until we could no longer stare. As it got darker, the city was transformed into hills of pretty lights, serenely reflected onto the shimmering waters of the sea.

A teenager standing a few feet away from me started to hum, *“I Left My Heart in San Francisco.”*

I wanted to kick him.

On the other side of the humming teenager, were a couple of kids who appeared to be watching my brother and me.

They smiled at us so we smiled back. Then they came over to introduce themselves and we liked each other right away. I thought it was amazing that they were the exact same age as my brother and me.

We talked to each other as if we’d always been friends.

We were interrupted by a loud voice that came over the PA system. The voice welcomed passengers aboard the ship then continued to give specific instructions that the

adults paid close attention to. The PA announcement prompted everyone to head to their cabins to get ready for dinner.

Our cabin was a small room with two twin bunks on each side. The lower bunks served as sofas during the day and were beds by night. My brother took the top bunk above Papa's. I took the top bunk above Mama's.

To the right of the cabin door was a sink. Above the sink was a mirrored medicine cabinet and bolted underneath it were metal toothbrush holders. To the left of the door, across from the sink, was a dresser. Against the wall opposite the door, was a small table and chairs, nestled between the two bunks. The bathrooms were located in the hallway right outside our cabin.

“For the next three weeks this lovely naval passenger cabin is our home sweet home”, Papa said cheerfully.

He was clearly where he belonged.

After we got ourselves situated, we walked out together to head to the dining room. Passengers smiled and greeted each other on the way to the ship's elevator. Upon entering the dining room, I immediately noticed the round dining tables bolted down to the floor and I wondered why.

I saw our new friends already seated at a table. The family waved for us to join them and we did. It became our permanent seating arrangement for the entire trip. We all agreed that we had the best table in the room. I sat next to my new friend Carol who, like me, loved to talk. As our brothers talked about music and baseball players, Carol and I wondered how challenging it would be, to play jacks aboard a moving ship.

Carol and I noticed right away, that the dining room crew was made up of older servicemen. We found out it was because they were close to retirement and *The Barrett* was their last assignment. We met two Filipino crew members, who immediately took to us.

They asked if we “*wanted to get involved in the ship's activities.*” Based on that one question, we knew we were in for a fun adventure.

Carol began interviewing the one named Steve, quite deeply. She was asking him a lot of questions. But he didn't seem to mind. I felt tired and hungry, so I stopped listening.

A parade of crew members walked in with our food and without delay, I politely attacked my meal, as soon as grace was said. I patiently sat and waited for the after dinner conversations to end.

I looked around and observed people moving about freely. I was amazed that I could barely feel the ship moving. It was as if I were inside a house that was gently floating away at sea.

I can hardly wait to get back to our cabin, to brush my teeth in the cabin sink.

I can hardly wait to change into my pajamas.

I am thrilled to sleep on the top bunk, in the cabin of a moving ship.

I can't wait to wake up somewhere else tomorrow morning.

I have new friends, no school and twenty one days of play time.

I can hardly wait to get started.

Chapter Four

I wasn't expecting Carol to ask her parents, if she and her brother could see our cabin after dinner. But I had to admit, I wanted to know where their cabin was too.

"You don't have windows!" exclaimed Carol.

I suddenly felt embarrassed that we didn't have any.

Then she sat on one of the lower bunks, shrugged her shoulders and said, *"Windows are okay but all you're gonna' see out there is water anyway!"*

"I know!" I said relieved. *"And if I want to see water I just have to go up on deck right?"*

"Yeah!"

We talked a little more before my brother and I walked with them to their cabin.

On our way to their cabin, Carol told me, *"I really don't want to go to the Philippines, but I'm going to make sure I have fun while I'm there!"*

I said, *"I heard the insects there are gigantic!"*

"Wow! Really? I wonder if they're gigantic enough to ride on."

"I don't think they're that gigantic! Aren't you scared?" I asked.

"No, are you?"

"No, I'm not scared either," and at that moment I wasn't lying.

I was glad that Carol had an infectious imagination.

I was glad to have her as my friend.

Little did she know that she was helping me forget my gigantic fears of giant insects and of all things unknown.

MIDDLE:

Twenty One Days at Sea

Chapter Five

Day 1

I got up early today because I did not want to waste any time. Morning prayers were important to Papa. So each morning, that was the first thing we did. At home, each of us said our own prayers when we woke up. But because we were all together in our little cabin, we prayed together as a family today.

People always told us, “*You’re so lucky. Your Papa was very strict when he was a young father. He’s gentler and funnier as an older father. You kids are lucky.*”

So I always felt that way around Papa: *Lucky*.

“*Can you hear that?*” Papa asked.

I walked closer to the door and listened carefully. I heard faint music from a distance.

“*Someone is playing the xylophone!*” said my brother.

“*You’ll hear that before every meal time,*” said Papa.

The cheerful music was getting closer and louder when all of a sudden it stopped right outside our cabin.

Then there was a knock.

Papa opened the door and saw Carol with the crew member named Steve. Carol called him Steve the Steward. He was the mealtime xylophone player and it appeared Carol was his new sidekick.

Steve the Steward wore wire rimmed glasses. He was short and chubby. He had the laugh of Santa Claus and the charisma of Pied the Piper. Part of Steve the Steward’s job was to play the xylophone as he walked around the ship before each meal time. It was to announce to the passengers that it was time to head to the dining room.

Steve and Carol apparently came to ask Mama and Papa if I could walk with them around the ship, “*Can she come with us?*”

“*Can I? Please?*”

“*Sure!*” said Mama and Papa.

Off we went walking next to Steve the Steward as he played his xylophone through the ship's halls. *“Time for breakfast!”* he'd cheerfully yell out every now and then. Off we went dancing behind him. Off we went pretending to be majorettes as we marched ahead of him.

Halfway to the dining room, we noticed a half dozen other kids marching behind us.

That morning right before breakfast, Steve the Steward asked our parents' permission to appoint us *“assistant stewards”* for the duration of the trip. There were nods all around the table.

Carol immediately accepted her position with an, *“Aye, Aye, Sir!”* and a hand salute.

I took a step back, stood straight and gave Steve the Steward a hand salute as I gladly said, *“Aye, Aye, Sir!”*

Day 2

I couldn't tell the difference from where I woke up this morning to where I was when I went to bed last night. Outside it looked as though the ship were floating in the middle of nowhere. But I knew that the ship was moving.

As Steve the Steward, Carol and I walked around the ship to announce meal times today, more kids began to walk, dance and skip with us all the way to the dining room.

After lunch today, children and teenagers were invited to the lounge area to work on crafts.

Carol and I met up with all of our new friends and sat together. Each of us was given a small rectangular sheet of copper toned tin, a small piece of wood and a template. We were instructed to put the tin over the template and hold it in place. Using the small piece of wood, we rubbed the surface until the design on the template was completely transferred on to the tin.

I looked at everyone else's work and thought they looked like masterpieces.

I examined my finished work and decided that my craft looked hokey. I didn't do it right.

We wrapped our art in tissue paper and tied it with colored yarn. We were to give it to our parents as thank you gifts on Thanksgiving. I winced and thought, *“Poor Mama and Papa...”*

When the activity was over, I looked to everyone at our table and asked, “Want to go play on deck after this?” They all nodded. So we brought our specially wrapped artwork to our cabins.

Then we played on deck until it was time to announce dinner with Steve the Steward.

Day 3

I could smell Aqua Velva and hear muffled conversations through the door. Teenaged boys were already standing around in the hallway. They were waiting for *Blondie* from the cabin next door to come out.

Steve the Steward and Carol would have had to squeeze their way through the boys to get to our cabin. So I waited for them around the corner from our cabin. From that corner, Steve the Steward could play his xylophone loud enough for everyone on that side of the ship to hear. Then we could walk the other way.

*My neighbor wasn't really a blonde.
She was a cute Filipina teenager who wore tight tops and short shorts.
She usually had her hair in a beehive.
Sometimes she wore a blonde wig over her long, black, silky hair.
Boys loved her.
They called her “sexy”.
I wanted so much not to like her.
But she was so nice to me.
Just yesterday she called Carol and me “cute” and invited us to their cabin to “chat”.
We quietly sat on the lower bunks with nothing to chat about.
So Carol and I left right away and played on deck instead.
She made little girls like us wonder what it would be like, to be a popular teenaged girl.*

Day 4

*Water here, water there,
Water, water everywhere,
Water there, water here.
When will land appear?*

Today was not so exciting.

Walking around with Carol and Steve the Steward felt more like a chore.

Playing on deck wasn't as fun.

I missed San Francisco.

I missed my sisters and classmates today.

I missed running and skating on land.

I missed sidewalks, cars, houses and tall buildings.

I was getting a little tired of water.

I stayed in our cabin today to read books and Superhero comics.

Since I couldn't watch TV, reading took me to places other than this ship.

When I was done with one book I opened another and read some more.

But today in the cabin as I lay on my tummy with my open book, it felt as if there were different sizes of waves in the ocean.

I felt lots of them.

I didn't like the feeling at all. I wanted to roll down a window but there was none.

Day 5

Steve the Steward and Carol came by to pick me up the next morning, but I was sick.

The constant movement of the ship made me sick all night.

The thought of breakfast made me sick.

Mama, Papa and my bother left me in the cabin while they went to eat breakfast.

I moved to the lower bunk before everyone left.

It would be easier to run to the sink from there, if I got sick again.

No matter where I sat, or what I did, the ship continued to move in a swaying motion.

Stop...

Please stop...

They weren't strong sways but just enough to make me dizzy.

I sat on the lower bunk with my eyes closed as I leaned against the wall.

I got startled when Papa opened the door.

Steve the Steward and Carol came back with them to drop off a sandwich, an apple and a bottle of soda. *"It's for later when you get hungry,"* said Steve the Steward.

I got up to thank them. I stood at the cabin door in my robe and pajamas and watched them walk away. I wanted so badly to go with them but I felt really woozy. I closed the door and carefully placed the food on top of the table.

Then I walked to the sink and got sick again.

Ate Olive was right. How will I survive?

I knew I was really sick when I imagined someone over the PA say something about *"land from a distance."*

Chapter Six

Day 6

I wanted to stay in bed because I still felt woozy. But my brother told me all my friends were up on deck so I got up and changed. On my way up, I stopped a couple of times to look out but I couldn't see what everyone was talking about.

As soon as I stepped on deck, the warmth of the sun and fresh ocean breeze immediately made me feel better. I rushed to our family's favorite spot where we usually watched the stars and where Papa told me stories.

"I could live on a ship forever," Papa sighed as we looked up at the stars that shined brightly.

"I thank God everyday for my years in the Navy because it allowed me to live life exactly the way I wanted. My music and being at sea have always been my passion, and I was blessed to be a musician who traveled by sea."

I said, "I wish I could have seen you lead a band, Papa."

"Well, I taught music to a few musicians in the town we're visiting. So I'm sure you'll have the opportunity to see me conduct at least once."

"I can't wait, Papa!"

Then he said, "I haven't told anyone yet, but this will be my last trip at sea."

I gasped. "How come?" I asked.

He took a deep breath and paused; then he said, "What do you think about going back to San Francisco on a plane?"

"That would be great, Papa!"

"Then that's what we'll do!" said Papa laughing. "Your brothers and sisters have all traveled with me on a ship except for you. Now that you've had this experience, it's high time I travel by air!"

Mama and my brother waved as soon as they saw me. Papa held his hand out to me so I ran to him and slipped under his arm.

I asked everyone, *"Where's the land everyone is so excited about?"*

Mama pointed to the big rocks that were sticking out of the water, “*Right there. We’re approaching the Hawaiian Islands.*”

“*Those rocks are the Hawaiian Islands?*”

“*As we get close to any of the stopovers, the first things we’ll see are rocks,*” Papa explained sounding quite amused.

My brother said, “*Whenever we start to see rocks, that means land is just ahead.*”

“*Exactly,*” said Mama. Then pointing beyond the rocks she said, “*If you look straight ahead you’ll see the island of Oahu.*”

I stood on the tip of my toes and looked to where she was pointing. “*I see it! I can see it!*” I jumped and laughed at the thrilling thought of walking and running on land again.

Then Papa said, “*We will pass the international date line pretty soon. It’s an imaginary line where one day begins as another ends. It is a vertical line on maps that runs between the western tip of Alaska and the eastern tip of Russia, then down to the west of Hawaii, then down to the east of New Zealand, and so on. It has a lot of crisscrosses but the only land it actually goes through is Antarctica.*”

“*So what happens when we pass it, Papa?*” I asked.

“*Well, we will have to adjust our alarm clocks and watches and because we’re travelling east, we’ll lose one calendar day from the week.*”

It all sounded so confusing but I couldn’t wait to experience it.

Day 7

Passengers rushed to shore as soon as the ship docked in Honolulu yesterday. We were at the urban area on the southeastern shore of Oahu Island where there were plenty of restaurants, tourist spots, and souvenir shops to visit. Beautiful island women were gracefully dancing the hula in their skimpy tops and grass skirts. Their necklaces, bracelets and anklets were all made of flowers. They also wore a single flower tucked behind one ear. As we walked off the ship each of us received leis which are what the flower necklaces were called.

The sun was shining brightly, the sky was so blue and it was nice and warm. Most of the people we passed on the street had a smile on their face so I felt so welcomed. The long colorful dresses worn by the ladies and the men’s Hawaiian shirts made me feel cheerful.

From a distance, I saw a smoking mountain, which Papa told me was the Diamond Head Volcano.

After lunch, we bought stationery and postcards from one of the souvenir shops. Then we found a picnic table under a shady tree where we sat and wrote letters and postcards to send back to San Francisco. Since I knew the letter addressed to Mrs. Weiking would be read out to the class, I made sure to write clearly and briefly.

I suddenly missed everyone at school as I wrote about Carol, Steve the Steward, Honolulu, and Diamond Head. I quickly wiped away tears and hoped no one saw me cry. But my brother must have seen me based on the funny look he gave me. So I was glad when he didn't say anything because I hated to be teased or called a *cry baby*.

As I carefully slipped my letters and postcards into the corner mailbox, I told Mama and Papa, "*I will just have to come back to Hawaii when I am old enough*," which made them both laugh. I liked Hawaii and wished we could see more places but there wasn't enough time. I secretly wished the place we were going to in the Philippines would be just like Hawaii.

I did not want to continue sailing farther away from San Francisco, but the USNS Barrett was on a tight schedule and the Pacific Ocean was waiting, so back to the ship we went.

Day 8

Our big brothers must have felt sorry for us because they decided to come with us today. Most of our friends who started out with us in San Francisco stayed behind in Honolulu and it was odd that we continued the trip without them.

But our brothers walked behind us like chaperones.

"They're boring," whispered Carol.

"I know!" I nodded in agreement.

"Let's not ask them to come with us again!" whispered Steve the Steward.

Carol and I glanced back at our big brothers and giggled quietly.

Day 9

Steve the Steward saw Carol and me sitting on deck chairs today. He sat in one of the chairs and asked if we ever noticed the shape of the horizon.

Carol and I thoughtfully replied “Uh-uh.”

Steve the Steward got up from his chair and said, “*Watch what I’m about to do.*”

We sat back and watched Steve the Steward close his left eye and slowly trace the tip of the horizon with his right hand as far as we could see. We suddenly realized that the horizon was shaped like a half circle.

Then he said, “*If we trace the horizon on the other side of the deck, you’ll see that it is shaped like a half circle over there too.*” So we ran to the other side of the deck and traced the horizon with our own fingers.

“*Aha!*” we both laughed with eyes wide open, “*That’s how Christopher Columbus knew that the world is round!*”

Day 10

“*How lovely!*” Mama exclaimed as she saw the craft my brother made.

“*Good job!*” said Papa as he examined it closely.

I cringed when Mama began to peel the tissue paper off from the craft I made for them. Mine was the image of flowers embossed onto copper toned tin, except it was not as clean as my brother’s image of Mother Mary. Mine had too many scratches where I had pushed down too hard with the block of wood. I had the horrible feeling Mama would immediately say “*ugh*” once she saw it.

“*It’s very nice.*” said Mama.

“*Ah... yours has artistic details,*” said Papa. “*I like it!*”

“*I’m sorry I messed up. I didn’t know it was going to be a Thanksgiving gift for you until after we made it. I would have done a better job if I knew,*” I confessed.

“*What are you sorry about? You did a good job!*” said Papa.

“*I think it’s lovely!*” said Mama.

My brother grinned because we both knew they were trying to make me feel better. So I gave them both a big hug.

When we heard the faint sound of Steve the Steward’s xylophone Mama said, “*You’d better get ready because your friends are getting close.*”

I sat on the bed to wait and when the music sounded closer, I gave Mama and Papa a kiss, a wave to my brother and told them, “*I'll see you at the table!*”

I pulled the door behind me and ran around the corner.

“*Happy Thanksgiving!*” cried Carol and Steve the Steward.

I waved and yelled back, “*Happy Thanksgiving!*” loud enough for voices from inside the cabins to yell back “*Happy Thanksgiving out there!*”

Steve the Steward lightly tapped the xylophone keys to signal that it was time for us to go. So we followed our usual route, which always ended inside the dining room.

The dining room was decorated with beautifully woven paper birds hanging from the ceiling over each table. The captain later announced that the crew members had personally made each of them by hand and that there was enough for all of the kids on board.

The Chaplain led everyone in a solemn prayer of thanks before we shared a tasty, traditional Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings and ended with pumpkin pie and ice cream for dessert.

The dining room was immediately filled with excitement and laughter when after dinner, it was announced that the decorative birds were stuffed with candy. As the paper birds were gently pulled down from the ceiling and distributed to all of us kids, we got up and thanked as many crew members as we possibly could.

Passengers were thankful for the hard work that the crew had put in, to provide our families with a memorable holiday away from home. I vowed to remember, share, and spread the kindness and joy we had experienced that Thanksgiving Day of 1962.

Day 11

Mama hummed as she sorted through the things she bought in Hawaii. She grouped items together; then carefully wrapped them in tissue paper and placed them in one the dresser drawers.

“*Who are those for, Mama?*”

She smiled at me and said, “*These are gifts for friends and relatives. These are what we call pasalubong (puh-suh-loo-bong)*”

“*Pasalubong means gifts?*” I asked.

Mama said, “*It means homecoming gifts, to be more specific.*”

“*Do we have a lot of family there, Mama?*”

“*Oh yes! We have a huge family!*” she laughed. Then she gathered me into her arms and sat me on her lap as she reminded me of the names and titles I had to remember on Papa’s side as well as her side of the family.

There were so many names but what I found most confusing were the titles. There was *Tiya* (*tee-yuh*) for aunt, *Tiyo* (*tee-oh*) for uncle, *Kakang* (*kuh-kōng*) for an aunt or uncle who is older than my parents, *Tita* (*tee-tuh*) for a younger aunt, *Tito* (*tee-toe*) for a younger uncle, *Lolo* (*lōl-ōh*) for grandfather or granduncle, and *Lola* (*lōl-uh*) for grandmother or grandaunt.

Although *Lola* was a title used for grandmothers, I was to address both of my grandmothers as *Inay* (*in-eye*). I was to call my maternal grandmother named Glicerio as *Inay Seya* and my paternal grandmother named Romana was to be addressed as *Inay Manang*.

The only titles I knew up to this point were *Ate* (*uh-teh*) because that’s what I called my older sisters and female cousins. And *Kuya* (*coo-yuh*) which is what I called my older brothers and older male cousins.

“*I’m not sure that I’ll remember them all,*” I worriedly told Mama.

“*Once you meet everyone and connect the faces to their names and titles, you’ll do just fine. You’ll get used to the titles before you know it,*” she assured me.

I hoped she was right.

“*Are you excited to see everyone again, Mama?*”

“*I am very excited to see my mother and sisters, my cousins and all my friends again. I love them so much. I’m going to personally thank each of them for writing to me all those years. Their letters meant so much to me.*”

“*If you’re happy, then why are you crying?*”

She laughed and said, “*It’s precisely because I’m happy that I’m crying!*” which made absolutely no sense to me at all.

Chapter Seven

Day 12

I watched Blondie throw her cue stick at the boy she was playing shuffleboard with. She turned around and ran right past me and down the stairs. One by one the boys on deck slowly headed downstairs, probably hoping to be the one to make Blondie feel better.

The shuffleboard which was rarely available was suddenly open and I had no one to play with. Not that I knew how to play the game, but it would've been fun to play around with the sticks and pretend.

“Wanna’ play shuffleboard?”

A smiling girl who was probably the same age as Carol and me stood next to me. She had long black wavy hair and wore a blue and white Hawaiian muumuu dress like the girls on shore wore. She even had a flower tucked behind her right ear.

“I don’t know how,” I said and shrugged.

“You just push those pucks into the triangles with the stick.”

“How do you win the game?” I asked her.

“Oh, I don’t keep score, I just like pushing those pucks into the triangles; so you wanna’ play?”

“Okay!” We immediately ran to the board, picked up our sticks and began to play.

Her name was Lani and she was eight years old. She said, *“My sister and I saw you guys this morning. Can we come with you, next time you pass by our cabin?”*

“Sure you can! Our friends who got off in Hawaii used to come with us a lot.”

“How fun! Do you guys go all the time?” she asked.

“Yup! Except for the time I got sick, I’ve gone every time.”

“Okay then, we’ll go with you later.”

“What are you guys doing?” asked Carol who finally made it up on deck.

“We’re pretending to play Shuffleboard!” said Lani.

I introduced Lani to Carol who also picked up a stick and joined in.

We had a great time pretending until some adults offered to teach us how to play the game properly. We looked at each other and thought about it. Then we handed the sticks over to the adults and decided to play tag instead.

Day 13

The new kids from Hawaii turned out to be just as fun as the kids from San Francisco. They even taught Carol and me how to dance the hula to the music of Steve the Steward's xylophone.

I sat on the bar stools with them at the soda fountain while we waited for the birthday party to start. We were all invited to a movie and party games in the multi-purpose-room this afternoon. Most of us did not personally know the girl who was celebrating her birthday but everyone including Blondie and the boys showed up.

Once the movie began, the bigger kids rolled their eyes and whispered, “*Why are they showing Bambi?*” I had not seen Bambi, so I was excited to watch it and wished the bigger kids would be quiet. I was fascinated with how beautifully animated the movie was when all of a sudden, the movie took a sad turn. Younger kids began to bawl and I understood why the bigger kids were puzzled. Once the movie was over and the party games began, we all forgot about the sadness.

As I left the multi-purpose room after the party, I saw Mama pay for something at the ship’s store, so I went to ask her what she bought.

“*How was the party?*” she asked as I gave her a kiss.

“*Bambi was kinda’ sad but the party was a lot of fun!*”

“*That’s good!*”

I was tired from the games and sleepy from having eaten so much that I forgot to ask her what was in the small bag.

Day 14

After our morning prayer, Papa handed me the small bag that Mama was holding yesterday, “*Go ahead, open it,*” said Papa.

I slowly pulled out a small box from the bag and I drew in my breath when I realized it was my very first wrist watch. It had a small white oval face with black numbers and black leather straps.

“Do you like it?” asked Mama.

“I do!”

Papa said, “We will pass the International Dateline today so we decided you should have a wristwatch to adjust.”

“Thank you, Mama and Papa!”

Later that day, when it was announced that we were passing the International Dateline, I was glad to be part of the time-adjusting frenzy that went on all around the ship.

Day 15

I watched Papa as he carefully pushed the bed covers tightly under my mattress, but that wasn’t why I woke up. The ship was rocking wildly and Mama was busy gathering everything that had fallen off the table which was now rolling everywhere on the cabin floor.

I was scared.

“Go back to sleep,” Papa whispered calmly.

I closed my eyes but couldn’t go back to sleep. I silently listened to the sound of unsteady footsteps in the hallway. I occasionally heard a light thud and muffled conversations.

I listened to Mama pray softly in the bottom bunk and I wished the ship would stop rocking.

“Anybody else awake?” asked Mama

“I am,” said my brother.

“Me too,” I said.

Papa turned on the light and asked Mama to lead us in prayer. I prayed very hard for our safety and I was out like a light no sooner than I said, “Amen”.

Day 16

It was hard to climb down from the top bunk because I had to pause and balance each time I took a step, so Mama helped me down.

It was even harder to brush my teeth and wash my face with one hand as I held on to the sink with my other hand. Water spilled onto the cabin floor each time I moved. I was dizzy but I did not want to be left alone in the cabin this time, so I didn't mention it to anyone.

Steve the Steward knocked on the door and politely told me that he did not want Carol or me to announce meals with him until after the storm had passed.

On the way to breakfast, passengers used the railings along the hallways for the first time. It was like walking on the moving floors of the fun house at Playland in San Francisco.

During breakfast, I found out that the occasional thuds were from a few people who lost their balance on the way to the bathroom. Today I was glad that the dining room tables were bolted down to the floor.

The prayer service in the multi-purpose room was packed today and prayers were said with much feeling as chairs slid slightly, each time the ship rocked. We all went back to our cabins after the service and as the day progressed, I was ill again.

By the end of the day, Mama and my brother fell ill as well.

Day 17

We were all too tired from being sick all night, so we did not go to the dining room this morning. Steve the Steward delivered food to our cabin. Apparently, crew members delivered food to other cabins as well, including Carol's.

No one was allowed to go up deck today. No one was brave enough to dare.

Day 18

Though the ship was no longer rocking I imagined that it still was. I was afraid to go anywhere on the ship, let alone go up on deck for fresh air. So sleep was the only thing on my mind and all I planned to do.

Then an announcement came over the sound system. We were fast approaching an area which was home to several White Whales. We were urged to go up deck before noon, to catch the rare and stunning sight of white whales in their natural habitat.

Anxious passengers got dressed and flocked to the deck to begin their whale watching experience. Everyone including my family was out in full force. Passengers

strolled from one side of the ship to the other hoping to catch a glimpse of the white whales.

A few minutes before noon, Steve the Steward showed up on deck to play his xylophone. He yelled, *“Time for lunch!”* as he walked all around the deck.

Passengers said, *“We might miss the whales, Steve!”*

Steve the Steward grinned and continued to play his xylophone as he yelled out, *“Time for lunch!”*

A few other stewards came up to tell everyone that it was all a hoax. *“The Captain wanted all of you out of your cabins and under the sun to catch some fresh air.”*

A collective sound of laughter and disbelief came from all corners of the ship.

On the way to lunch, everyone laughed and talked to each other about how gullible we all were, and what a great way it was to fall for a hoax!

Chapter Eight

Day 19

“*Rocks!*” Carol and I said to each other as we caught sight of them through the round windows.

“*We’re getting very close to Guam,*” said Steve the Steward as he peeked out alongside of us.

Carol and I couldn’t wait to see Guam.

“*Is Guam like Hawaii?*” I asked Steve the Steward.

“*It’s much smaller but the people are just as friendly,*” replied Steve the Steward.

“*Have you been there before?*” asked Carol.

“*Yup! Plenty of times and I’ve always enjoyed it,*” said Steve the Steward.

“*We only have three more days together after our stopover in Guam,*” I blurted.

I regretted saying it because we continued to watch the rocks in silence immediately after I said it.

After awhile, Steve the Steward said, “*I’m really going to miss the two of you. I’ve never had buddies like you in all my years in the Navy.*”

In a weak attempt to lighten the mood I said, “*I guess that makes us special!*”

“*Darn right you are!*” said Steve the Steward as he laughed out loud.

“*What are you going to do after this trip?*” asked Carol.

“*I’ll ship out to San Francisco one more time. Then when the Barrett heads back this way, it’ll be time for me to retire,*” said Steve the Steward.

“*Let’s write to each other,*” I said.

“*Okay! Let’s trade addresses before the trip ends,*” said Carol.

“*I’m not much of a writer,*” said Steve the Steward. “*But I can send postcards.*”

“*That’ll work!*” I said.

“I’ll ask my Dad if he can film us on deck so I can remember you guys forever,” said Carol.

“*That sounds great!*” I said.

“*I agree!*” said Steve the Steward.

Guam definitely seemed smaller than Hawaii but it was just as warm and lush. Island music was playing at the pier and just like it was when we docked in Honolulu, we were also given leis.

Tiyo Dave, who came to pick us up, spotted us right away. He quickly walked over to us and gave Mama and Papa a hug. Then he ruffled my brother’s hair and pinched my nose, which was what he always did in San Francisco when he was stationed at Treasure Island.

On the way to their house, *Tiyo Dave* raved about his wife Shawn’s cooking, her kindness and hospitality. At one point he even said, “*I can’t wait for you to meet her. I feel like I won the lottery!*”

Tiya Shawn was everything he said and more. She was charming, had a great sense of humor and knew exactly how to make us feel welcomed. “*How long will you be in Guam?*” asked *Tiya Shawn*.

“*The ship leaves for the Philippines tomorrow morning,*” said Papa.

“*That soon?*” asked *Tiyo Dave*.

“*Then there’s no time to waste. We’ll give you a tour of the island immediately after lunch,*” said *Tiya Shawn*.

She barely finished her sentence, when I glanced at the open window behind Mama and let out a loud scream.

“*What happened?*” asked everyone.

I pointed to the window and nervously said, “*There’s a snake behind Mama!*”

Everyone immediately turned to look, only to laugh and calmly tell me that it was a lizard; not a snake.

“*Are you sure it’s not a snake?*” I asked.

They assured me it was not a snake.

They explained to me that lizards like snakes, are reptiles. The difference was that lizards had four feet, external ears, eat insects, and are harmless. They also told me that lizards can sometimes detach their tails to get away from people or other animals who want to harm them. The detached tail continues to move for a short while to distract the predator as the lizard quickly gets away.

I thought it was the most interesting animal I'd ever seen until they said, "*You'll see them on the ceiling of most homes in the Philippines.*"

I shivered and responded, "*Ewww!*"

After lunch we took a short tour of the island. We were unable to go through certain areas, since crews were still clearing debris and fallen trees that resulted from the same storm we felt on the ship.

We went downtown to look through the "*slightly-damaged*" clearance sales prompted by the recent storm. Mama found a pair of shoes for me, a wallet for Papa, scarves for her and a shirt for my brother. She looked at me and whispered, "*I don't see why any of these are considered damaged!*" I couldn't figure it out either.

At the end of the day, we were brought back to the pier.

I told *Tiya Shawn*, "*I really enjoyed our short visit and I'm glad to have met you.*"

She held me tightly as we said goodbye then she said, "*I promise to visit when I go back to the Philippines.*"

I asked her, "*When?*"

She laughed and said, "*Soon!*"

Day 20

Carol's Dad asked my brother and me to go up deck after breakfast so that we could be filmed. He was busy setting up the projector when we got there so Carol and I walked laps around the deck as we waited for the filming to start.

Carol and I ran back when we heard Carol's brother call out, "*Come on back, guys!*"

"Is everyone ready?" asked Carol's Dad.

"Yup!" we all said simultaneously.

“Smile and wave,” said their Dad, so we did.

Then he stopped the projector and instructed us to walk a few feet away from him. He signaled for us to smile into and walk toward the camera.

We did that as a group, as pairs and also one by one. Steve the Steward stopped by to be filmed for a few minutes, then went back to work.

“Now we’ll always remember all of you,” said Carol.

“I’ll always remember you too!” I said weakly.

*We stood at the rails and watched the blue water ripples.
I couldn’t think of anything to say.
I felt sad that Carol and I would no longer see each other everyday.
I felt sad to leave Steve the Steward.
I felt sad to leave the USNS Barrett.
I felt sad to leave the sea.
I felt sad to leave the sea?
Yes, I even felt sad to leave the sea.*

“You know what?” I asked Carol.

“What?”

“I really loved this trip and now I really love the sea,” I said.

“Me too, from now on every time I see the ocean, I’ll remember everything about this trip,” said Carol.

“Too bad we can’t go to the farewell party later, huh?”

Only kids ages twelve and above were invited to the *Farewell Dance Party* at the multi-purpose room.

“We can listen to the music outside of the multi-purpose room and have our own party!” suggested Carol.

“That’s a great idea!” I agreed. “Let’s have our own party!”

We were delighted when our parents allowed us to dress up and have our own going away party outside the multi-purpose room.

After lunch, we went to our cabins to take a nap since we planned to stay up later than usual.

Mama pulled my hair up into a tight ponytail and tied it with a white ribbon. I wore my pretty white dress with a petticoat. It had thin red stripes along the hemline and thick red velvet that went around the waist. I wore white socks and black patent leather shoes.

Carol's mom teased her short hair and held it in place with hairspray then she clipped a small ribbon in it. She wore a pretty blue dress with a petticoat and she carried a matching purse. She also had on white socks and black shoes like I did.

Blondie took us by the hand and led us into the multi-purpose room where we stayed until the real party started. We did not mind leaving once it began and we sat on the bar stools at the soda fountain as we listened to the music. Our brothers snuck out some food for us and bought floats for us to drink.

While we were there, we talked up a storm with the store clerk and told her how much we appreciated the times she occasionally handed us a cookie or a piece of candy during the trip.

When we heard Chubby Checker's "Twist" and Dee Dee Sharp's "Mashed Potato" Carol and I got up and danced. Lani who came with her sister, danced with us for awhile but left when her little sister got tired. Steve the Steward came and sat with us for awhile too.

Then it was announced that the last dance would be a *Limbo Rock Contest*. And when *Limbo Rock* was played, the store clerk came out from behind the counter and held out a stick for Carol and me to go under.

Meanwhile kids in the multi-use room started to get louder. They laughed and screamed "Go! Go! Go!"

Carol and I stopped dancing and the store clerk listened with us as we strained to hear who was declared winner of the contest.

Then the door flung open and laughing kids came out. Laughter quickly turned to tears as friends hugged and said their farewells.

Blondie smiled when she saw Carol and me, "Did you have a good party out here?" she asked.

We told her that we did.

She gave us each a hug; then she held us by the chin as she looked us in the eye, and whispered, "Don't change. Stay true to yourself."

"What do you mean?" I asked

“You’re good girls. Stay that way.”

I nodded slowly because it sounded like good advice.

Then I asked her, *“Who won the Limbo Contest?”*

She pointed to me and said, *“Your brother did.”*

Day 21

In the letters I wrote to San Francisco last night, I told them how I had learned the meaning of discipline; respect for others; and respect for nature on this trip.

I wrote to my teacher Mrs. Weiking about how I unexpectedly inherited Papa’s deep love for the sea, but what I learned the most was appreciation of family; and how to accept and enjoy true friendship from many kind neighbors.

“What are you doing?” asked my brother.

“Writing letters; have you written your letters?”

“Yup!” he answered.

“Did you have fun on this trip?”

“I had a lot of fun because I never got sick on board this ship. I ate everything I was supposedly allergic to and had no reaction. I never got tired even once. Not even after dancing so much last night!”

“Do you think being on the ocean cured you?”

He nodded and said, *“I think so.”*

“I hope you stay healthy in the Philippines,” I said to him.

“Me too.”

“What do you think it’ll be like for us over there?” I asked.

“I think it’ll be okay. Are you still worried about the giant insects?”

“I wasn’t anymore until you brought it up!”

END:

Life in the Islands



Kalesa

Chapter Nine

Carol's hair was beautifully done up and she wore her Sunday best when she and Steve the Steward came to our cabin on the morning of December 7, 1962.

This was our last time to announce meal times together on the USNS Barrett. The ship was getting ready to dock and we were all preparing to leave the ship.

It seemed like a very quick breakfast. Passengers hurriedly said goodbye to friends they've made; exchanged addresses and collected contact information. Before we knew it, the dining room crowd had thinned out. Everyone quickly headed to their cabins to gather their belongings.

Steve the Steward's eyes were swollen from crying when we saw him standing by the ramp. He could barely talk as he thanked Carol and me and told our parents that he never had as much fun on a trip ever before.

Carol and I gave Steve the Steward a hug and the three of us quietly sniffed together.

Our families promised to stay in touch with each other as we walked off the ship.

Once we stepped off the ship, local family members who came to pick us up took us all in different directions.

I looked back to wave.

We wrote to each other for a little while after that day, but none of us ever saw each other again.

Chapter Ten

The drive to General Trias, Cavite was a bumpy ride. There were times when I thought we were driving through fog, but then later realized we were driving through dust. It was sticky, muggy and blazing hot like the relatives had warned me about. I wondered about the giant mosquitoes and suddenly felt the hairs at the back of my neck stand up and goose bumps on my arms.

The unpaved roads of the province were nothing like San Francisco.

On the road were *Jeepneys*, which were apparently the most popular form of public transportation. They were originally made from US Military jeeps left over from World War II which had evolved into unique mini buses that were colorfully decorated and had crowded seating. Also on the road was another form of public transportation which was bicycles with sidecars called *Tricycles*. But what really caught my eye were native horse buggies called *Kalesa* (*kuh-leh-suh*).

Merchants walked along the side of the streets, as they balanced food trays on their heads. They would occasionally scream out what they were selling as their unique way of advertising.

We occasionally stopped for water buffalos led by farmers coming out from the rice fields. I watched men and women who wore colorful clothing and odd hats, as they worked in the rice fields. They were bent over as they busily picked rice. It looked like fun, but *Tiyo Polong*, whose car we were riding, told me it was hard labor.

Once we arrived at my maternal grandmother's house, I was immediately disappointed. It was not what I expected. I had hoped for something similar to Hawaii and this was not.

There was no running water, but there was an artesian well.

No flushing toilets but there were buckets of water to flush the toilet with.

No tub or shower, but a stall to stand in and pour water on yourself from big clay water jars.

We had gone from city life to camping and a happy camper I was not.

“*Welcome!*” said an older lady who I assumed was my grandmother, *Inay Seya*.

She saw me staring at everything and cheerfully said, “*Baka mahirapan ka sa una, pero masasanay ka rin sa katagalang*”

Mama laughed and said, “*This is your Kakang Perta. She is my eldest sister. What she told you was that, you'll probably have a hard time at first, but you'll get used to it in time.*”

Mama told me to kiss her hand, so I did and my aunt uttered a *Tagalog* blessing in return.

Then a much older distinguished and beautiful lady walked in and said, “*Ako ang iyong Lola na si Inay Seya.*”

Mama said, “*This is my mother and she just said she’s your grandmother Inay Seya.*”

I was so happy to see that *Inay Seya* was also excited to meet me, so I ran to her and gave her a big hug and a kiss.

Mama and Papa told me to kiss her right hand as a sign of respect, so I did and she gave me a *Tagalog* blessing in return as well.

“*Must I kiss everyone’s hand?*” I asked.

Papa said, “*Grandmothers, grandaunts, granduncles, aunts and uncles.*”

“*Really?*”

With a serious tone Papa replied, “*Really.*”

I watched Mama and Papa reunite with family and friends and I was happy for them. But I was beginning to lose track of names, titles and who was related to whom. I tried to make sense of the conversations but could not keep up. I heard an occasional *Kuya, Ate, Tiyo* or *Tiya* and the rest sounded like gibberish. More people showed up by the minute and each person either brought about a burst of laughter or tears.

*Each time a new face came into the room a new name and title was introduced.
Everyone spoke fast yet I had no idea what was being said.
I went where I was told to go,
I sat where I was told to sit,
When Mama and Papa bragged to relatives that I knew how to speak Tagalog,
I spoke the few words I knew how to say.
Relatives were fawning over my brother.
I felt lost and wanted to be found.*

Then an energetic younger lady came in and gave me a tight hug. “*I’m your Tita Bien. I’m the youngest sister of your Mama. Welcome home!*” I was so happy that she spoke straight English that I hugged her, kissed her hand and kissed her on the cheek as well.

She led me downstairs to where the table was filled with food, fruits and desserts. *Inay Seya* led us in prayer before we ate the food I had never tasted, but ended up liking very much.

As we ate, I could not help but notice the two ladies behind us who continuously waved fly swatters, to make sure flies never landed on the food. I noticed how flies flew faster but they weren't much bigger than the ones in San Francisco.

“Giant insects my eye!” I whispered to my brother.

Shortly after lunch, Mama, Papa, my brother and I were driven to the cemetery to visit burial places of family members. The first grave we visited belonged to Papa's first wife, who was the mother of my sisters. I watched Mama and Papa sign themselves with the sign of the cross followed by a silent prayer.

When they were done I asked, *“Why were you praying?”*

“I thanked God that I knew her in life and I prayed for her soul now that she is gone.” explained Mama.

“Oh, okay,” I said.

“What was she like when she was alive?”

Mama said, *“She was one of the nicest ladies I had ever met. She was a very nice neighbor and she used to come to our house a lot. My father loved speaking with her in Spanish because they both knew how. She was very kind, and giving. She always seemed happy.”*

“Why did she die?”

Papa said, *“Her health deteriorated after our son died during World War II. She died of a broken heart.”*

Upon hearing that I wept and could not stop crying; I felt so sad for her that she lost her son and I felt sorry for my sisters for losing their brother and their mother.

After awhile, Papa held my shaking body and said, *“That's enough crying for one day. The thing is, if she had lived I would not have remarried and you never would have been born.”*

I looked up at Papa and said, *“I love you, Papa. I'm still sorry that she died.”*

Then we got into the car again and were driven to another cemetery where my great-grandparents and my grandfather were buried.

This time I joined them in prayer, but I began to cry uncontrollably again because I never knew them in life and I wished I had met them, especially my maternal grandfather.

“Let’s go visit Inay Manang now,” whispered Mama to Papa. “This is too much for her to handle. Let’s come back another day.”

We left the cemetery and were driven to my paternal grandmother’s house which turned out to be a very short trip. She stayed with Papa’s sister and her family who lived just two blocks from the cemetery. When we arrived at their house, Papa’s sister *Tiya Denang* cried for joy and her husband *Tiyo Ensoy* shook Mama and Papa’s hand profusely.

My cousin *Ate Nita* knew we wanted to see *Inay Manang* so she helped our grandmother into the living room.

I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw Papa’s mother.

She was the lady in my dream!

Mama and Papa kissed her hand then she softly asked for my brother. He went to her and kissed her hand as well.

Papa told my grandmother that I was in the room, so she held her hands out to me and I approached her slowly. She held both my hands and gently pulled me down so that I knelt in front of her. She never once looked at me directly and her gaze was constantly fixed above my head. I suddenly realized my paternal grandmother was blind.

She slowly traced the features of my face, felt the length of my hair; then she pulled me to her and gave me a kiss. She held her right hand out for me to kiss and I did it with great respect. With her right hand on my head, she uttered a blessing I did not understand but I was glad to receive.

The love and warmth that everyone displayed toward me in such a short amount of time, already made up for the missing comforts of an American home. I was welcomed by everyone with a hospitality I had never experienced.

Still, I wondered how long it would take me to get used to the heat, understand everything, and speak the language fluently.

Chapter Eleven

A small crowd was gathered at the front yard of *Inay Seya*'s house when we returned and once again, a joyful chatter immediately erupted as we got out of the car. I was beginning to understand how big our family was and how many friends my parents had.

A perfectly made up, pretty young lady, wearing a beautiful floral dress and fancy high heels, quickly made her way through the crowd. I could hear the ruffling of her petticoat as she cheerfully told my brother and me that she was *Ate Nene*, our cousin. She was the daughter of Mama's older sister, *Kakang Pilar*. She demurely pointed to her father across the room, using her coral painted lips and told us that he was our *Kakang Ciano*. I vaguely recognized them from photos they had sent to us, though *Ate Nene* was lighter skinned and taller in person.

Mama and Papa agreed to let her bring us to their house where it wasn't so busy. They lived across the street in a two-story house built during the Spanish Era. A dirt pathway lined with fruit trees and bushes led to the side entrance of their house, where a stairway took us up to a veranda landing. Throughout the interior were hardwood floors and carved furniture all made from *Narra*, a local mahogany. Like most of the houses we passed, the sliding windows were made of hardwood panels that framed a series of *Capiz* shells, which are polished, translucent, oyster shells.

Ate Nene pushed open the sliding windows and when I asked her why they had fancy looking window bars, she explained that it was for security reasons, since windows were usually left open because of the heat.

I hopped up and sat on the window sill where the cheerful sound of laughter from *Inay Seya*'s house could be heard. I watched a young *Tricycle* driver wipe the sweat off his brow, as he merrily pedaled hard in the blazing heat. The driver could barely reach the pedals, but pedal he did!

Coming from the other direction was the horse and buggy called a *Kalesa* which I planned to ride as soon as I possibly could.

“*What are those called?*” I asked *Ate Nene*, referring to the passing wagons that were pulled by odd looking bulls.

“*Those are farm wagons called Karitela and they are being pulled by water buffalos called Kalabaw in Tagalog or Carabao in English. The passengers are farm workers on their way home from working at the rice fields.*

Some kids on the street looked up and waved timidly. I waved back, and said, “*Hi there! What are your names?*”

One of the girls said, “*How are you?*” then they all ran away giggling.

I must have looked puzzled because *Ate Nene* immediately explained to my brother and me that they weren't being rude, they just didn't know what else to say. She also made clear that kids around there giggled a lot. "Next time," she said, "I'll tell them that you both understand Tagalog."

As we continued to talk, I couldn't help but notice the volume of band music playing on a neighbor's stereo that continued to get louder. I later realized it wasn't coming from someone's stereo, but from a live marching band from up the street.

"*Halika na! Parating na ang Bandang Matanda kina Inay Seya!*" Exclaimed *Ate Nene* which meant we should head back because the Old Band (the band's name) was getting closer to *Inay Seya*'s house. So we closed up and followed her down the stairs, through the dirt path and back across the street.

*I stood behind Papa and pretended to watch a silent movie.
The musicians welcomed him home with great respect.
I had never seen a live band before, so I thought they'd be in band uniforms like
on the cover of John Philip Sousa albums. I guess not.
I was surprised to see the musicians in their regular clothes.
The front gate was held open as young men carried in long wooden benches
into the front yard for band members to sit on.
Some guests gave up their seats. Then with a little hunch, praying hands and
slightly extended arms, they quickly dashed away.
I wondered if I would eventually have to hunch down that way someday soon.*

I snapped out of it when *Tita Bien* asked me what I was doing. We had a good laugh when I told her that I was pretending to watch a silent movie.

"*Do you know that the band has grown to almost twice its original size? Half the members of this band are first generation students of your Papa's! They're here to give your Papa a special welcome and show off the new generation of musicians who have joined while he was gone.*"

Papa winked at me as he made his way out to the front yard.

Tita Bien nudged me and said, "Come on, let's watch from upstairs."

We ran up through the back stairs and found my brother and *Ate Nene* already positioned at the front window when we got there. We watched the band warm up then listened as they played marches I had never heard before. Each time Papa called out a title, the musicians pulled out sheet music, and played it. The only marches I'd ever heard before were pieces composed by John Philip Sousa, and most of these were not his.

"*They're playing a lot of your Papa's original music,*" said *Tita Bien*.

I gasped and suddenly felt a surge of pride and exhilaration. I never realized Papa was a composer!

I leaned out a little further to catch a glimpse of Papa, who was now standing under the awning directly beneath us.

I felt something flutter by my ear a couple of times but I didn't pay attention to it and just shooed it away.

“What was that?” I asked *Ate Nene*.

“Ipis lang iyon,” she calmly replied.

I looked to *Tita Bien* for a translation, who told me, *“It’s just a cockroach.”*

I jerked around and saw four shiny, dark golden-brown creatures behind me. They were not the size of plates as I was told, but they were at least two inches long and about an inch wide. Two were crawling on the wall as their antennae moved swiftly. The other two were headed toward me as they flew aimlessly!

I let out a shriek and ran down the stairs as my arms flailed in front of me! The band stopped playing when Papa came into the house to find out what had happened.

“There are big flying cockroaches upstairs! I want to go home now! Can we please, please go home now?”

I shuddered when Mama and Papa said, *“But we’re already home, remember?”*

I had forgotten about the crowd downstairs and all the musicians, until I heard everyone’s laughter. They told me not to be scared of such a *“tiny insect”*. I wanted to explain to them in *Tagalog* that those cockroaches were not tiny compared to the ones I’ve seen in San Francisco. But I knew it wouldn’t come out right and they’d probably laugh even more. So I kept quiet.

“She’ll get used to it!” they calmly assured Mama and Papa and I hoped they were right.

Tita Bien and *Ate Nene* said they squashed the flying villains before I even reached the bottom of the stairs. *Such brave women!*

I sat quietly next to Mama for the rest of the evening and later began to slap and scratch my itchy legs.

Mama pulled my hands away and motioned for me to stop.

I whispered, *“My legs are just itchy from the heat and all the dust, Mama.”*

Mama whispered back to me, “*You’re itchy from mosquito bites, not from heat or dust.*”

I looked at my legs and whispered back, “*Mosquito bites? I never even saw one fly by!*”

Mama and Papa unpacked our pajamas and toiletries once everyone had gone. *Kakang Perta* and *Tita Bien* unfolded mosquito nets and carefully hung them over each bed throughout the house. After I quickly entered the net which was like a rectangular see-through camping tent, Mama tightly tucked all the ends underneath the mattress and warned me not to put my arms or legs against the net. I guess mosquitoes bit right through nets! I nodded and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I woke up to a dark sky, crowing roosters and the sound of small birds chirping in the trees. My cheek was itchy because my face was up against the net where it wasn’t supposed to be. I reminded myself not to scratch.

The moon was still out, but I knew it was already morning because of all the activity. I couldn’t believe how early folks got up around here! Neighbors were already cleaning their yards and burning piles of dried leaves.

A few bike riders lazily pedaled by and a few people strolled by, all holding small paper bags of bread rolls.

I saw that Papa was already up and ready to go somewhere.

“*Where are you going, Papa?*” I whispered.

“*I’m going to walk with your Tiyo Polong and Kakang Angel.*”

“*Can I come?*”

“*Not this time, honey. Go back to sleep.*”

We both heard the faint knock at the front door so I got up halfway as Papa bent down to kiss my forehead through the mosquito net. As the three of them walked away, I wondered how long they’d be gone and when the rest of the household would get up.

Then I heard muffled laughter coming from the kitchen and as I listened closely, I recognized the voices of *Inay Seya, Kakang Perta, Tita Bien* and *Mama*.

My brother and I were the only two people who weren’t up. I wanted to run to the kitchen but it really was still quite early. I also didn’t want to run into any new insects along the way!

I touched the bump on my cheek and the bumps on my legs.

*Giant mosquitoes are a myth! They're tiny just as Ate Minyang said.
She was right to make me promise not to scratch. The itch is quite unbearable!
Big flying cockroaches, nasty mosquitoes and the heat will take some getting used to.*

Chapter Twelve

“*Time to get up and eat,*” said Papa gently. He always woke me up with enough time for snoozing. Papa knew exactly how to ease me into the day.

My morning routine didn’t change much since we got here. Every morning, my brother and I still pulled out our prayer cards from underneath our pillows and read the basic prayers that Papa had so neatly written for us.

What was new is the ritual of kissing the right hand of all the elders and receiving a blessing from each one of them. The most common blessings I’ve received have been, “*Pagpalain ka ng Diyos*” which means, “*God bless you*” or “*Kaawaan ka ng Diyos*” which means “*God have mercy on you.*” The best blessings by far, have been from *Inay Seya* and *Inay Manang*, which have been beautiful prayers for safety, protection and days of ease and joy.

As my brother and I raced down the stairs, I began to think of toast and cereal which we haven’t had since we arrived and I was beginning to miss it.

But I was quickly getting used to eating garlic fried rice with eggs and sausages called *longonisa* in the morning. I’m also getting used to the fried dried milkfish called *daing* served with either vinegar or slices of fresh tomatoes. Then there are the thick slices of sweet cured pork called *tocino*, which reminded me of a cross between sugary ham and bacon.

At breakfast, the topic was Christmas once again! It has been the most talked about subject since we’ve arrived. I’ve been told that radio stations began to play Christmas Carols in September and outdoor decorations of multi-colored lights and Filipino Christmas lanterns called *Parol* (puh-rōl) have continued to multiply throughout the neighborhoods ever since.

Yet even with all the talk about Christmas, very few kids talked about Santa Claus. I mean, *very* few! I stopped talking about Santa, wish lists or presents because of the odd looks I’ve received whenever I’ve brought it up. Children and adults talked more about what they’d wear to church or what they’d have to eat on Christmas Day. They also wondered a lot about how much money they’d collect on Christmas. *Money?*

“*Tomorrow, the sixteenth of December is when Simbang Gabi starts!*” said *Kakang Perta*.

“*What’s Simbang Gabi?*” I asked.

“*It’s a Filipino Christmas tradition, which is a series of nine masses that start at four o’clock in the morning. It begins on December 16th and ends at the midnight mass on*

the 24th of December. Here in our town, a marching band plays music throughout town to help wake the people up, so they can get ready for the four o'clock mass."

I felt a hint of sadness when I heard what the band did to wake people up. It reminded me of what Steve the Steward, Carol, and I did aboard the ship.

"Are kids allowed to go the four o'clock mass if they wake up early enough?" I asked.

"Yes! I'd be happy to take you with me if you wake up on time!" She spoke English with great effort, but she spoke it well because she learned it from an American teacher.

"I don't know if I'll be able to wake up early for nine mornings in a row, but I promise to get up on time tomorrow!" I said eagerly.

She grinned and gave me a suspicious look as she said, *"We will see about that!"*

I didn't make it to all nine of the masses, but I made it to most. It was fascinating to see the church overflowing with children and adults at four o'clock on a weekday morning.

Every morning, local food vendors were stationed close to the church entryway, where they sold sweet rice cakes, steaming hot tea and other native food items. People gladly bought food immediately after mass, before heading to work or school.

As much as I missed green Christmas trees and beautifully decorated store windows in San Francisco, I was captivated by the Filipino Christmas traditions that unfolded before me.

Just two days ago, Papa's younger brother *Tiyo Binong* made us four artfully hand crafted *Parol*. Light bulbs were wired into each *Parol* and when they were lit in the evenings, the house looked just like a traditional Filipino Christmas card.

He also gave us a Christmas tree that he made out of thin plywood, colorful art paper and string. It was so uniquely stunning that I forgot all about the green Christmas trees I wished we had.

The best part was when Mama and Papa promised that I would understand the true spirit of Christmas this year and did I ever!

On the morning of Christmas Eve, Mama and Papa sent *Tita Bien* and me on a special Christmas mission. We went to the public market where local vendors had stores and stalls and sold their products under one roof, Farmer's Market style.

First we delivered a letter to the owner of a grocery stand. Then we walked to the meat section where we picked up baskets filled with clearly marked packages of freshly cut meat and poultry from *Kuya Andong* and his wife *Ate Pining*'s meat stand.

We then headed to the front of the market, where *Tita Bien* hailed a *Tricycle*, though I secretly wished we had hailed a *Kalesa*.

Our special mission was to deliver the packages to some unsuspecting relatives who otherwise, would have had little or nothing to cook on Christmas Day. *Tita Bien* then told each family to go to the grocery stand at the public market, where they could pick up rice and whatever else they needed for their holiday meal. I had never before seen grown ups jump so high or cry tears of joy; nor have I ever seen kids get so excited—over packages of meat!

On Christmas day, it was as if the whole town roamed the streets after going to church. After church, I went with *Kakang Perta* to greet friends, family and neighbors, and from each home we visited, I received perfumed handkerchiefs with folded bills inside of them. The amount inserted in each handkerchief varied from house to house. Some gave more and others less. It was almost like Trick or Treating but with a different twist. I finally understood why kids wondered how much they would collect.

The streets were filled with children and adults who greeted one other, “*Merry Christmas!*” or “*Maligayang Pasko!*” Although a few homes were closed, most homes around town were open, and everyone was welcomed.

Then Mama and Papa’s favorite people came for dinner. There was *Kakang Binang*, *Kakang Angel*, *Tiyo Kanor*, *Tiya Isang*, *Ate Choleng*, *Tiyo Tinong*, *Kakang Melencio*, *Kakang Ides*, *Kakang Berya*, *Ninang Tinang* and a few others. They all told funny tales around the table and laughed late into the night.

On New Year’s Eve, our family and neighbors stayed up until 12:00 A.M. to greet each other a “*Happy New Year!*” and trade dishes of food over the fence. Extreme noise making was a huge part of tradition so firecrackers called *kwitis* which translates to skyrockets and *bawang* which means garlic, were fired all day and into the following morning.

What I enjoyed the most was setting off dancing firecrackers called *watoosi* by putting them under my shoes and scratching them on solid rough surfaces such as a sidewalk or a concrete walkway. I always ran from it and watched from a safe distance once it started crackling. I also enjoyed lighting pretty sparklers called *lusis* which reminded me of the sparklers that were lit during the Fourth of July.

As midnight approached, we were warned to stay indoors since gunshots were sure to be fired by gun owners who traditionally rang in the New Year, with a literal bang.

One of the popular New Year traditions was for kids to jump up as high as they could at midnight, so that they'd grow tall. Though there were plenty of short people everywhere I looked, I still jumped up as high as I could, and hoped that it would work.

At midnight, Papa cranked up the volume on the stereo as he played *Auld Lang Syne*. Then we popped balloons, kissed the hand of all the elders, and did our rounds of hugs and kisses before we prayed and shared a meal, to welcome in the New Year.

*Of the many family Christmas traditions I learned,
I treasured the true meaning of giving and the joys of sharing.
Of the many family New Year traditions I learned, I treasured the silly clanging of
pots and pans throughout the house, to scare away evil spirits, and the midnight
family meal that we shared, to mark a new beginning of prayer, togetherness and
prosperity.*

Chapter Thirteen

*Days turned into months...
Months turned into years...*

“*Read comic books!*” said Sally, “*It will teach you the slang words.*”

Sally was a girl my age from Cavite City who enjoyed reading my English story books while she let me read her *Tagalog* comic books. Her English and my *Tagalog* had improved since we began to practice word definitions and proper enunciations together.

I’ve been grateful for everyone’s patience with my broken *Tagalog*, but their eagerness to help me learn is what I’ve been grateful for the most.

Sally went to St. Joseph’s in Cavite City, the Catholic school *Ate Wawa* mentioned at the pier. I wasn’t accepted there when we went to enroll last month, since the school year is winding down. The nun told Mama to come back and enroll me in third grade around May.

On the other hand, Gen. Trias Memorial Elementary School accepted me!

I wore my favorite school dress and my black patent leather shoes on my first day of school. Mama pulled my hair up into a pony tail because it was hot. She handed me a school bag which held a spiral bound notebook, sharpened pencils and a sandwich. Then *Tita Bien*, who had volunteered to take me to school, brought me to the principal’s office where I saw a few aunts and cousins who taught there. They gave me a warm welcome and told me that I would like Miss Pisares because she was a good teacher and a very nice lady.

I held *Tita Bien*’s hand tightly as we climbed up the stairs of the third grade class room. It was a small structure that stood by itself behind the main school building, close to the rice field.

I felt anxious as soon as we reached the doorway so *Tita Bien* nudged me in slightly. I wanted to run after her as she walked down the stairs, but my teacher took me by the hand and led me to the front row where she sat me next to a girl named Merdelita.

The teacher said she was the smartest girl in class and spoke English very well. Merdelita smiled at me and said, “*Hello.*” Then she shifted her focus toward the front of the class and remained that way for the rest of the day. She was a very quiet neighbor.

As Miss Pisares introduced me to the class filled with smiling faces, they immediately began asking the teacher questions about me. I understood everything they were asking but I was unsure on how to respond so I kept quiet and let the teacher do the talking.

The girls in class wore light, sleeveless summer dresses with flip flops or pretty sandals. The boys wore t-shirts, shorts and flip flops. I was mortified by the fact that I was the only one wearing shoes and decided that I would ask Mama to buy me flip flops or some nice sandals after school.

At lunchtime my classmates either had rice or noodles for lunch. I was too embarrassed to pull out my sandwich so I didn't have lunch that day.

“Gusto mo?” (Do you want some?) asked the girl named Amelia whose nickname was Amy. She offered to share her noodles with me.

“*No thank you,*” I said.

“*Are you sure?*” she said.

“*Yes I’m sure,*” I said.

“*Positive?*”

“*Yes, I’m positive,*” I said.

“*You’re sure you don’t want any?*”

“*Yes, I’m sure. Thank you.*”

She gave me a funny look then said, “*Okay, if you’re sure.*”

Then she said, “*You know what? I have cousins who have the same last name as you. Their names are Cynthia, Marcia and Johnny.*”

“*I know them!*” I exclaimed.

“*I thought so,*” she said.

“*Where do they live?*”

“*They live at Clark Air Base in Pampanga.*”

“*Is that close?*” I asked.

“*No, but they come around a lot on the weekends.*”

“*That’s great!*” I said.

Since then, Amy and I became good friends.

After a terrible car accident that happened in front of school one day, Amy and another classmate named Annie, convinced me that it would be safer for us to walk home through the rice fields behind school.

I didn't realize how slippery the strips of dirt in the rice fields were or how hard it would be to walk on wearing leather shoes. *I wished I had on flip flops or sandals!*

I imagined walking on the strip of dirt was probably how it felt to balance on slippery tightrope. I had a hard time keeping up with them, so they occasionally stopped to wait for me. I felt embarrassed for being so slow, so I began to walk faster but I lost my balance and fell into the watery rice paddies. I was terribly embarrassed when they had to walk back to pull me out.

It was a constant struggle to stay balanced on the thin strip of moist dirt with wet shoes. But I was determined not to slip and fall again so I paid close attention to my every step. The heat from the afternoon sun was dreadful and the rice field offered no relief.

I stayed focused on my feet as we got closer to the end of the field. I was thrilled when we finally reached the "finish line"!

But I froze at the sight of the irrigation ditch that we had to jump over to get to the other side.

I watched them take a step up and easily jump across. I was horrified at the thought of slipping because of my wet shoes.

"*Kaya mo iyan!*" they yelled out to me from the other side, assuring me that I could do it.

I wasn't sure that I could.

Crazy thoughts raced through my mind as I watched the running water flow through the irrigation. "*I'll probably fall and get washed away, never to be found,*" I whispered to myself.

"*What did you say?*" yelled Amy.

"*I can't do it!*" I yelled back.

They said something to each other before they jumped back to my side of the ditch.

They came back to tell me that we would all three jump together. Annie jumped back and forth a couple of times to show me how easy it would be.

“But my shoes are wet,” I told them.

Annie took her sandals off and handed them to me. *“Wear these and I’ll hold your things.”*

“What about you?” I asked her.

“I can jump with my bare feet.”

I gave her sandals back and said, *“I can do this.”*

They each held my hand as we counted, *“One...two...three...”* then the three of us leapt together. First we laughed for gladness then we couldn’t stop laughing at how scared I was, and how muddy I was. I had to do a lot of explaining when I got home that day.

Three months later, Miss Pisares gave me a written and verbal aptitude test and decided that I was ready to for the fourth grade!

Then it was off to St. Joseph’s where Sally worked at the cafeteria, which they call the canteen, as part of a reduced tuition program.

“Dalian mo naman! Para ka namang pagong!” (Hurry up! You’re like a turtle!) whined one of the bratty kids from our class. She was one of many privileged kids who felt entitled to make fun of kids who worked at the canteen.

“Sally!” I called out.

She slid back behind the glass counter and asked me, *“Can I help you?”* with a smile.

“Can I have a bag of chips and a bottle of soda, please?”

She nodded and reached for a bottle of soda from the cooler, and as she did, the small group of bratty girls waved at me and said, *“Come sit with us when you’re done.”*

I smiled politely. I knew how it felt to be at the receiving end of nastiness and I refused to be at the giving end.

“How long do you need to work behind the counter?” I asked Sally.

“I’ll be done after I help you.”

“Then let’s just sit together,” I said

When they saw that I chose to sit with Sally, they looked at me with disdain. One girl in particular challenged Sally to a staring contest. Their table broke into laughter when Sally gave her a dirty look, but did not accept the challenge.

I told Sally not to pay attention to them, and she replied, *“They always make fun of me but they don’t bother me anymore. I’m used to them now. Plus, they’re rich and I’m poor, so that’s how it goes.”*

“So what?” I said, *“They shouldn’t treat you that way just because they’re rich!”*

“That’s how it is around here. Like I said, I’m used to it.”

The bell rang so we didn’t finish our conversation.

On our way back to class, Sally asked if I wanted to go to her house for lunch the following day. She said that she had been to our house many times, but I had never been to hers.

I nodded.

The following day we walked two blocks east of school and turned into a narrow pathway in between jumbled rows of houses. Everyone we passed knew Sally and told her how good she looked in her school uniform. She thanked every one who had something nice to say and introduced me as, *“My friend who teaches me English”*.

When we reached the last house at the end of the block she proudly said to me, *“This is home!”* Home was a small shack that had one bedroom with a curtain for a door. The living room, dining room and kitchen were all in one tiny room, and their backyard was the ocean. They were squatters.

Her mother was still frying fish when we arrived and the steamed rice had just finished cooking. She warmly welcomed me into their home and told me how honored they were to have me as a guest. *Me?*

Then she thanked me for teaching Sally how to pronounce English words properly. I told her it was nothing, but she wouldn’t hear of it.

She placed the fried fish on a small oval serving plate in the middle of the table, right next to the big bowl of rice and small bowl of sliced tomatoes. She called Sally’s younger brother and sister to the table and it was then that I realized that we were all going to share, the one small fish that she had just finished frying.

I took very little when they passed me the bowl of rice and I took a spoonful of fish and a few slices of tomato, when those came around.

Their Mom began to ration small amounts of fish, tomatoes and rice onto her children's plates, then placed what was left in front of me.

“Kumuha ka pa!” (Take some more!) she said. “You are our guest.”

“Aren’t you going to eat?” I asked her.

“I will eat after you all go back to school.”

She said that as parents, all they want is for their three children to one day graduate from college. She said a good education was all that they could offer.

Their Dad worked as a *Jeepney* driver and she washed clothes, but because their kids were smart and unashamed to work at the canteen they were able to go to a good school. She told me how grateful she was that I accepted Sally as a friend and how much it meant to their family that I had shared my story books with her.

*I smiled but I couldn’t speak.
I wanted to cry but I held back.
I wanted to make things better for them
But I didn’t know how.*

Since Sally admired my favorite shoes from San Francisco, I asked Mama and Papa if I could give them to her and I was glad when they agreed. I later wrote to *Ate Olive* to tell her about what I had done. She wrote back to me saying she would have done the same.

Sally fell ill and died in her sleep shortly after. I never knew she had a heart condition. She wore those shoes to her grave.

After that day, I became homesick for San Francisco again. I asked Mama and Papa when we were heading back and I wasn’t surprised to hear that we weren’t heading back anytime soon. It would not be the following year and maybe not even the next.

“Both your grandmothers have asked us to stay longer,” they both said.

I really couldn’t explain how I felt at that moment. I felt torn between wanting to leave, yet I was happy that we had to stay. All I knew was that I was sad and I wanted to be happy again.

Chapter Fourteen

*Years turned into tears...
Tears washed away fears...*

As I ate dinner in silence, my family talked about friends and family members they had loved and lost. And although I wasn't in the mood to listen, I couldn't help myself. They usually told fun stories at the dinner table but this night was different.

Kakang Perta reminisced about Victor, the one true love she ever had, who joined the Navy when they were both eighteen years old. She promised to wait for him and agreed to marry him upon his return. When he died at sea at the age of nineteen, she stood by his coffin and promised him that she would never marry and she never did.

Inay Seya talked about the kind Japanese soldier who befriended my grandfather *Tatay Sang Lo* during World War II. One day, all homes were to be evacuated and anyone found at home would be executed. The troops were to raid homes for food and search for guerilla fighters. *Tatay Sang Lo* was paralyzed and was unable to move, so *Inay Seya* and her daughters were forced to leave him behind. They prayed for his safety and left a plate of food and a glass of water before they tearfully ran to the makeshift concentration camp at the nearby grade school. That day, the kind Japanese soldier was with the troops that raided the neighborhood. When he saw my grandfather lying in bed frozen with fear, he pretended not to see him and reported instead that the house was clear. Later that day, he nonchalantly went back to feed my grandfather, and continued to do so for the duration of the lock down. It was said that the kind soldier was killed during liberation. He was found holding a white handkerchief in his hand.

The stories were clearly hard for them to share, but they told it to console me.
“*Thank you for sharing your stories with me tonight,*” I said respectfully.

“*Everyone who enters this world eventually has to leave and how a person lives is what matters; and how they will be remembered,*” said *Inay Seya*, “*and I will always remember Sally to be young, kind, helpful, humble and fun.*”

When I kissed their hand before bed that evening, they all in their own way, asked God to bless my young heart with strength; and my young mind with understanding.

The following day, after I did my homework, I visited *Inay Manang* just as I did most afternoons. As usual, she sent one of my cousins to buy shrimp chips and soda for us to snack on as soon as I arrived. She enjoyed snacking while we talked about how well everyone was doing in the States and which of her grandchildren were married, how many children they had, and so on.

Inay Manang showed signs of Alzheimer's disease and tended to ask the same questions and tell the same stories everyday. But it never mattered to me because I

enjoyed being in her presence and I knew she enjoyed mine. Whenever my older cousins teased me and pretended to pull my hair in good fun, she got terribly upset and I loved her for that.

One afternoon she took me into her bedroom and decided to chat with me there.

“I wish I could see your face and your long hair. You are the only grandchild that I never laid eyes on.”

“*You weren’t blind before?*”

She laughed and said, “*Of course not!*”

“*When did you lose your sight?*”

She thought for a moment then said, “*I can’t remember.*” Then out of the blue she blurted, “*I probably won’t be around for long, so I need to give you some important advice.*”

“*Important advice about what, Inay Manang?*”

“*About lots of things, such as boys.*”

“*Yuck!*” I said as I stuck my tongue out and rolled my eyes.

“*You just listen to me!*” she said sternly. “*Boys are not to be trusted!*”

“*Okay,*” I said lamely.

“*As you grow up, do not be a busy body. Be humble. Stay true to yourself. Always be honest.*”

“*Okay,*” I said lamely and remembered that Blondie told me to stay true to myself too.

“*And most of all,*” she said, “*Do not trust boys!*”

“*But you already said that!*” I said.

“*I did not!*”

I sighed and said “*Okay.*”

Inay Manang stayed silent for awhile. Then she asked me how well everyone was doing in the States and which of her grandchildren were married, how many children they had, and so on. So I told her again, as if I had never told her before.

One sunny day in September of 1963, *Inay Manang* wasn't waiting for me in the living room when I got there for my afternoon visit. *Tiya Denang* and *Ate Nita*'s eyes were swollen from crying.

"*What happened?*" I asked.

"*It's Inay Manang. She is not doing well, she is dying,*" said *Ate Nita*.

I went to *Inay Manang*'s bedroom where she appeared to be in a deep sleep, but her breathing pattern seemed labored. I knelt beside her bed and kissed her hand as my eyes began to water. I wanted to thank her for the ten wonderful months that we had spent together, but the words wouldn't come.

I lost her that day.

I sat next to my cousin Tessie at the funeral service and we began to sob when *Inay Manang*'s coffin was rolled into church. As we were sobbing, Tessie and I accidentally glanced at each other and immediately shared the same thought: *We looked funny when we cried.*

We buried our faces into our hands as we silently laughed at each other until we were red in the face. Our older cousins standing behind us thought we were crying so hard, that they began to rub our backs. Tessie and I peeked at each other through our fingers and giggled even harder.

Our giggles were abruptly interrupted when lightning lit the sky and the sound of thunder rumbled through the air. A storm was coming.

I quickly remembered where we were and why we were there, and once again, began to cry. I decided to focus on what was being said and did not once look at anyone's face from that point on.

Although *Inay Manang* and I had only spent a short time with each other, I always treasured our moments together. I was grateful to have known her, and that she had gotten to know me.

Whenever I visited her grave, I thanked God that I knew her in life and I always prayed for her soul.

Chapter Fifteen

“Where are you going Kuya?” I called out as my brother rushed down the stairs.

“To my friend’s house.”

I watched as he locked the front gate behind him. It hasn’t been the same since he became a teenager. The only people he hangs out with nowadays are his friends and I’ve become more of a nuisance to him. Sometimes I feel like an only child.

He even stopped playing checkers with me and no longer plays family Bingo on the weekends. I have been the only one left to entertain the elders, which was absolutely fine, because I loved to make them laugh!

Bingo nights with Mama, Papa, *Inay Seya*, *Kakang Perta* and *Tita Bien* have been lots of fun because they always let me call out the numbers. So instead of calling out “*B*, *9*,” I call out corny phrases such as “*Be nine tonight*” just to make them laugh.

My *Tagalog* finally evolved to near perfection, except for the times I still had to stop and think of what to say. Some of my friends concluded that I am quiet and shy, but I really am not. They even think I am joking when I tell them that I still conjugate in my head.

One amazing year, my brother-in-law, *Kuya Romy* showed up for a surprise visit. The Naval ship he was on had docked in Subic Bay. It was so much fun to see him again and hear about everyone back in the States!

Then Lita, Linda, Cathy, Monica, Suzy and Debbie from San Diego, moved in across the street. I was in the sixth grade when they became my new neighbors and went to my school.

It was fun to play familiar games that I hadn’t played with in a while, such as Monopoly.

It was fun to look up at the moon and the stars and see it through their eyes.

It was fun to translate for them.

It was fun to hear about the States after not being there for three years.

They stayed for seven months and left while I was at school.

I thought a lot about the States after they left.

Yet when Itek, Ping, Tobal, Chi-Chi and Jeng-Jeng asked me to be their make believe school teacher,

I was home again.

As time went on, I became more and more adjusted to the culture and missed the States far less than I had before. That was until Flor wrote in her letter that the Beatles were going to San Francisco. It was then that I begged that we return right away.

“Do you think you’ll see them just because you’re there?” asked my brother.

“Maybe!”

“Well you won’t! Plus, you’re too young to go to a concert,” he said, *“Who knows? Maybe they’ll come here.”*

“No they’re won’t! Why would they come here?” I asked.

“They won’t come to this town, but they might go to Manila.”

“Do you think Mama and Papa will let us go if they do?” I asked.

He thought about it then said, *“Probably not.”*

The Beatles did make it to Manila in 1966 and we weren’t allowed to go, just as my brother predicted.

So instead, we remained glued to the television for the length of their stay. Their shows were sold out and the fans absolutely loved them. But newspaper headlines stated “Beatles Snub President” and as a result, the group was mistreated. Kids were later told to burn their records and stop listening to their music.

But my brother and I loved playing their music. So we played their records anyway, as softly as we could.

“What are you doing?” asked Papa

“Playing Beatle songs,” we whispered.

“Why are you playing it so low?” he asked.

“Because kids aren’t supposed to play their records,” we replied.

“Who told you so?” asked Papa.

Unsure of how to respond, I said, *“The newspapers?”*

“Well I’m not a fan of the Beatles, but you are, and if I were a fan of their music, I wouldn’t let anyone stop me from listening to them.”

He said that he would teach us how to exercise a very simple, yet harmless freedom. With that, he turned up the volume and told us to listen without fear.

Although I was fearful of what the neighbors might think, I was more fearful to turn the volume down. My fears slowly vanished when I saw the growing number of kids that lingered near our house, to listen to the music coming from the stereo. *Freedom!*

It was on that same year that my cousin Ruth transferred to St. Joseph's with Amy from elementary school. Amy and I laughed as we told Ruth about the day I fell into the rice paddies and got muddied. I told them of the gigantic lessons I learned that day on how to stay focused, determined and how to be a true friend.

“You’ve changed a lot since then,” said Amy

“In what way?” I asked.

“Your Tagalog is great and you’re more like one of us now.”

“Then I’ve evolved into a true Filipino-American,” I said.

She nodded in agreement then asked, *“Did you ever get your Kalesa ride?”*

“Yes, quite a few times,” I said.

“And did you ever get used to the cockroaches?”

I slowly shook my head and said, *“ Nope, I can’t say that I have. After all these years, they still make me scream! ”*

I hadn’t realized how much I changed.

It meant a lot to hear Amy say that my Tagalog was “great”.

I’ve come a long way since the day we arrived in December of ‘62.

And though there were times I dreamt of returning to the States,

I can no longer fathom ever leaving, my little corner of the world.

Epilogue

Aside from timeline variances, purposely written that way to accommodate the number of years, and a couple of name changes, the experiences are authentic.

There is one fictional character named, Sally who embodies many friends. Sally is the young friend who shook me to the core, when she suddenly died in her sleep. She is the girl who wore my old shoes to her grave. She is the friend who taught me how to let go. She is the friend from school—whose family welcomed me into their home and broke open their hearts, during the course of a simple meal. Her name came from a friend who made a difference in her community. She is all of them combined.

It is because of my desire to preserve tradition, valuable lessons and great stories told by mentors from my past, that I wrote this book.

The town of Gen. Trias, Cavite has since progressed. Factories stand where old rice fields used to be. *Tricycles* became motorized and *Kalesas* have slowly vanished from their streets. Christmas Day celebrations have changed, mainly due to the growing number of families who can no longer afford to hold their homes open. But *Simbang Gabi* remains the same and marching bands continue to wake up the townspeople at dawn.

My deepest hope is that the mundane experiences of my youth will inspire you to appreciate your own. If you deem your stories too ordinary to share, think again, for it is usually in the ordinary that we encounter the most extraordinary.

I still strive to stay humble; be true to myself; and keep faith, especially during trying times. I do my best to value tradition and pass it down; to keep promises; to share; and stay honest with my dealings. And so it goes.

*Inay Seya passed away in 1967 and Papa in 1969.
After celebrating my eleventh year there in December of '73,
I left the following month as a wife and a mother of the cutest baby girl.
As I boarded the plane headed back to San Francisco,
I pulled out a picture from my pocket, as I whispered,
"Here we go, Papa...we're finally flying on a plane."*

I share with you the collective blessings from my youth: “*May you be forever blessed with peace, ease, good health, prosperity, safety, and above all, love.*”

Today and always, find joy in each moment—in your own little corner of the world.

Nerissa A. Broas